

Special Delivery

By Stephen Fraser

The Bronx Zoo announces the birth of a unique African mammal.

The African unicorn. That's what European explorers called a mysterious creature said to inhabit Africa's interior. Pygmies told stories about it. An occasional skull, piece of skin, or hoofprint would turn up.

Today, that creature is no longer so elusive. In 2011, the staff of the Bronx Zoo in New York City celebrated the birth of one, named M'bura. As she galloped around her shady enclosure, visitors marveled at the unusual animal with big, upright ears like those of a donkey, stripes like those of a zebra, and the silhouette of an antelope.



Julie Larsen/The Wildlife Conservation Society/Bronx Zoo
The Bronx Zoo's newborn okapi, M'bura

M'bura is an *okapi* (oh-KAH-pee). Bringing her into the world was a feat of captive breeding.

Giraffe Cousin

The okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*) is native to the Ituri rain forest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. About 10,000 to 20,000 okapis live there. Though the okapi looks like some kind of horse, it's a relative of the giraffe—the only one. Like the giraffe, the okapi has two *ossicones*—bony outgrowths covered in skin—on its head. It also has a long, dark, *prehensile* tongue similar to a giraffe's. Prehensility is the ability of an appendage or an organ

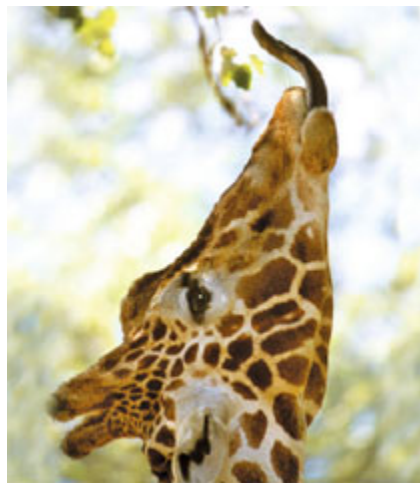
to grasp or hold. The okapi stretches its 46-centimeter (18-inch) tongue to clean its ears and eyelids and to strip buds and leaves from trees.



Julie Larsen/The Wildlife Conservation Society/Bronx Zoo

M'bura and her mother Kweli

The okapi is only one-third as tall as a giraffe with a shorter neck. It's also a solitary animal; except for mothers and infants, okapis keep to themselves. And then there are the zebra-like stripes on its legs and hind flanks, which serve as *camouflage*. Camouflage is a disguise that protects an animal from predators—in the okapi's world, leopards. "In dense forests, the okapi's stripes help break up the outline of the animal's body, making it more difficult for a leopard to spot it," says Pat Thomas, general curator at the Bronx Zoo.



Age Fotostock/Superstock

The okapi's only living relative, the giraffe, also has a long tongue and skin-covered horns on its head.

Stripes protect zebras in a different way. “Zebras live in groups and will run in a tight cluster when threatened,” says Thomas. “The stripes make it difficult for a predator to pick out one animal from another. Unless a predator can really zero in on one particular animal, its odds of catching a zebra are greatly reduced.”

Making A Match

The birth of M’bura at the Bronx Zoo was the result of a long, well-thought-out project. The prospective parents—Kweli and Poucet—were selected by the directors of the Okapi Species Survival Plan at the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago. More than 140 okapis are kept in captivity around the world. “The genetic makeup of each one is maintained in an international studbook,” says Thomas. Having that information helps zoos avoid *inbreeding*—the mating of two genetically similar animals—which can produce unhealthy offspring.



Picture Press/Alamy

Okapis are noted for the striping on their legs and rear flanks

Even when two okapis are a good genetic match, they may not get along, says Thomas. They’re put in adjoining cages separated by a sliding door and then gradually introduced. At first, the door is opened only wide enough to allow the male and the female to smell each other. If no signs of hostility arise, the door is opened wider, giving the two a glimpse of each other. A week or so later, the door is widened even farther, letting them touch and, finally, mate.



Super Stock
The skin-covered
horns on their
heads

When the due date neared, extra bedding was placed in Kweli's stall. Conditions were kept calm and quiet. Closed-circuit video cameras relayed images to a computer in another building, allowing keepers to remotely monitor the birth. "M'bura's birth let us know her parents had proper care and the habitat we created was conducive to successful mating," says Thomas.

Mother And Calf

After the birth, mother and calf were left alone to bond. Any disturbance could have frightened Kweli, prompting her to reject the calf. A newborn okapi can stand within 20 minutes and nurse within an hour. Four to eight weeks go by, however, before it defecates. In the wild, delayed defecation is a natural defense, limiting the amount of scent that could attract predators to a calf while its mother *forages* (looks for food). An okapi mother leaves her calf undefended for hours, returning only for short periods to nurse it. Mother and calf spend relatively little time together.



Blick winkel/Alamy

The long tongues they use
to strip leaves from trees.

The Bronx Zoo kept Kweli supplied with plenty of easily accessible food—leaves, hay, and grain pellets. Still, it won't be long—a matter of months—before she and M'bura separate for good. Like their wild cousins, captive okapis don't interact.

Eventually, M'bura will be able to have her own offspring and qualify for another captive breeding project. In the meantime, the young okapi is captivating visitors. "M'bura is a great ambassador for her species," says Thomas. "She inspires our visitors to want to conserve okapis."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Where do Okapis originate?

- A United States
- B Bronx Zoo
- C Democratic Republic of Congo
- D Amazon Rain Forest

2. How does the author describe the relationship between the Okapi mother and calf?

- A The mother and calf stay together for the majority of the day as the mother teaches the calf how to forage.
- B The mother and calf spend very little time together as the mother leaves the calf for hours at a time to forage.
- C The mother abandons the calf as Okapis are mostly solitary animals and do not travel in herds.
- D The mother and calf share a close bond that captivates zoo visitors who are able to witness the early days of a young calf's life.

3. What classification best describes the Okapi's eating habits?

- A omnivore
- B carnivore
- C predator
- D herbivore

4. Read the following sentence: "As she galloped around her shady enclosure, visitors marveled at the unusual animal with big, upright ears like those of a donkey, stripes like those of a zebra, and the silhouette of an antelope."

In this sentence the word **marveled** means

- A shouted with excitement
- B yawned in boredom
- C stared in amazement
- D jumped with joy

5. The author's purpose for this passage is to

- A advocate for the protection of the Okapi from poachers
- B inform the public about a unique animal and its attributes
- C demonstrate that zoos should not hold wild animals in captivity
- D point out the similarities between the Okapi and Giraffe

6. How does the author compare the Okapi to other animals?

7. Why would the Okapi’s prehensile tongue help it to survive?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

The Okapi has delayed defecation in order to limit the amount of scent that could attract a predator to a calf _____ the mother is foraging for food.

- A while
- B before
- C after
- D so

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Kweli and M’bura were kept in a calm and quiet environment because any disturbance could have frightened Kweli, prompting her to reject the calf.

Who? Kweli and M’bura

What? _____

Where? _____

Why? _____

10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: elusive (e · lu · sive): mysterious and hard to get a hold of.

10a. Read the sentences below and underline the word **elusive**.

1. Casey the Kid Parker is known as the most elusive outlaw of the Old West. Despite lawmen's best efforts, it took them over three years to catch Parker for his numerous train robberies throughout Arizona and New Mexico.
2. Billy threw his fishing pole into the pond in frustration; the elusive fish scurried to and fro with such speed that Billy thought he'd never land one!
3. Although mountain lions are common throughout the West, it is rare for you to ever have a glimpse of one, as they are extremely elusive and prefer their solitude.
4. If you've ever been to Central Park in New York City, you would know that pigeons are not elusive: they would land right on your shoulder if they spotted even a crumb of food!
5. After hours of pondering, questioning and guessing, Arturo still had not solved the elusive riddle. However, he was determined to find the answer!

10b. Which of the following would be more elusive to catch?



11. What is more elusive: a wild horse or a golden retriever?
